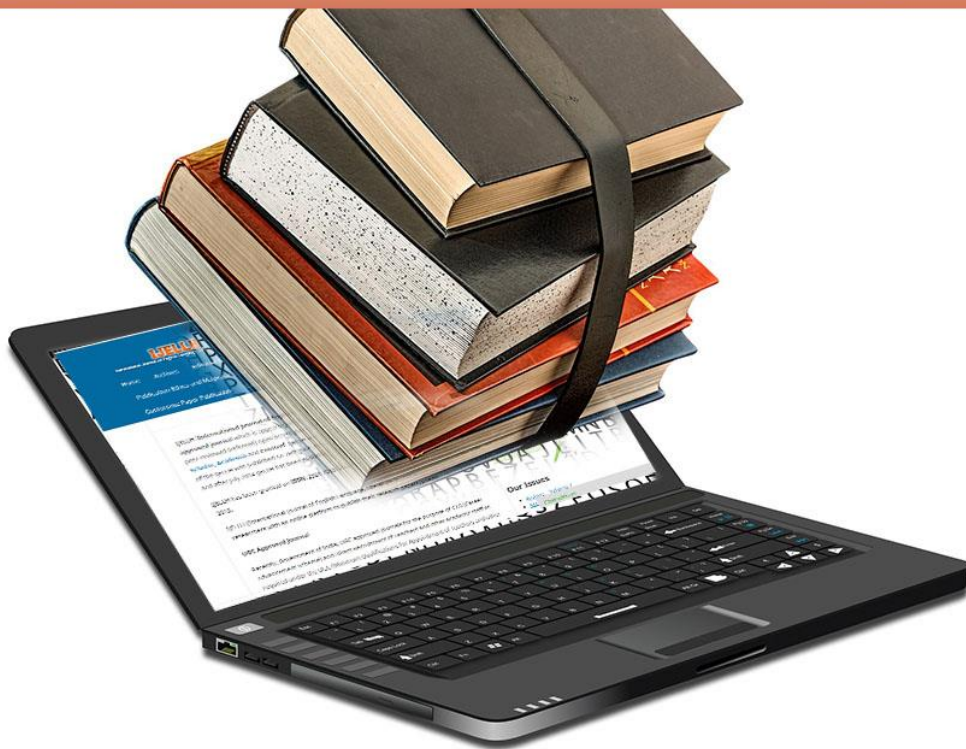


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The Valkyries: Paulo Coelho's Wake-up Call of Neo-transcendentalism

Abstract

The article attempts a close reading of *The Valkyries*, a Paulo Coelho fiction which narrates the novelist's endless saga through the vast American wilderness. The protagonist willingly undergoes several sufferings in order to achieve what lies beyond the apparent bitterness of the journey. The search moves beyond the physique as the journey proceeds through the dreary Mojave Desert. There the protagonist meets the Valkyries, a group of adventurous women in the desert.

The search for the angel takes Coelho to a transcendental realm. It transforms him into a totally different being who is capable of shedding his previous self. The return to the wilderness is a clear feature of the growing element of transcendentalism in the protagonist. Thoreau emphasizes the relevance of such 'return to nature' in his exposition of the theory of transcendentalism. The 'nature' assumes a dual role in Coelho. *The Valkyries* portray two modes of return, to the plain wild external nature and to the original intuitions of human nature.

Key Words

Myth, journey, transcendental, search, suffering, intuition, nature, revelation

Introduction

The Valkyries is a novel of search. Coelho weaves the careful thread of mysticism along with the philosophical aspects of the work. The narration assumes a personal tone as he names the protagonist Paulo. The intimate manner of storytelling renders it an autobiographical tenor also. Paulo begins his search for 'the angel' from the beginning of the novel. The angel proves to be a mythical character that is totally different from the biblical one. The search is more of an internal, personal one and the protagonist experiments with his passion and imagination to find the true angel within himself. This leads him even to self torture as the protagonist undergoes painful moments along with his then partner in life, who leaves him eventually.

The search can be equated with the transcendental search for the innate goodness of human beings as depicted in Thoreau's *Walden*. He comments, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (*Walden*). Individualism and self-reliance ring through the words of Paulo and this seems to be the sole driving force that moves him through Mojave Desert, in search of a meaning to his life.

Myth of Search

The myth of search forms the backbone of *The Valkyries*. Paulo has begun his search for the truth even before the journey to Mojave Desert. He tries to unravel the mysterious angel through fair and foul means from his young days. He makes mental journeys and seeks the help of dark powers to get access to the mystery which ends him up in great misery, both physically and mentally. He seeks shelter in nature to escape from the physical pain and torture and finds that only natural forces can keep the evil away.

The thought came from some far corner of his mind, some place that the darkness had not seemed to penetrate. Running water! Yes, there was a power in darkness, in delirium, in madness- but there were other things!

“Running water,” he said to her, as he bathed his face. “Running water keeps the evil away” (*The Valkyries* 125)

Paulo is not always alone in his journeys. He is accompanied by his partners in life. Conversations between them make the narration more lively and interesting. There is unruliness in his first relation whereas the latter one bond with Chris transforms into a romance-filled spiritualism. The character of Chris assumes great significance as the Mojave episode begins. It is she who initially remains as a disinterested onlooker towards the search, gains the first glimpse of the world of angels, to the envy and dismay of the protagonist. Thus the companion gathers a superior air with the arrival of Gene, the trainer in the transcendental experiences. His introduction induces more conversations and the three exchange their apprehensions. The role of such conversations in the transcendental scenario is often delineated as, “the deeply nurturing “aesthetics of conversation” that was central to the movement, without contradicting the well-known emphasis on the value and power of individual “intuition, but actually complemented it” (“Introduction: Transcendentalism Revisited”).

Paulo continues his search still the goal remains unattainable. The search itself turns to be the purpose and the introduction of the adventurous gang of women adds to the possible dimensions of the journey. The Valkyries also act as the channels through whom the purpose of the journey may be fulfilled. The women are portrayed as in an unending journey. They trespass the rules of ordinary men and the world seems to have forsaken them also. They outlive the moral as well as physical boundaries and their dusty motorbikes break the serenity of the desert often. The protagonist reaches the goal of the search through the aid of the

legendary voyagers; still he suspects the credibility of the dream- like experience in the end of the novel. He demands for concrete evidence in the final chapter which is provided to him as a testimony of the presence of an idol of Mother Mary in the desert.

Self- Denial and the Finding of the Second Self

Paulo experiments with his self throughout the novel. Apparently he challenges his real self in creating a counter-self which is in constant conflict with the real self. The denial of the self is a very clear evidence of the presence of the element of transcendentalism in the protagonist. The surrender of the civilized learned self makes him leave all the acquired parts of his self and he returns to the primitive, wild, original self which is often led by intuitions. The mental transformation gets reflected in his physical transportation to the Mojave wilderness. The journey through the desert equates with the innate urge in the protagonist to return to his inner, secretive being. Still, he feels a bit disappointed when he finds that it is not him the searcher, but Chris who gets blessed with the gift of a revelation. This leads him to the acceptance of more emotional torture.

The denial of the acquired self is represented in different ways by the other characters. Gene conveys the experience as,

A better word would be anguishing. It happened all of a sudden, back in the days when the Valkyries came through here. I decided I'd learn the process just for the fun of it, because at that point I didn't yet understand the language of the desert, and I was upset about everything that was happening to me.

My angel appeared on that third mountain peak. I was up there just wandering and listening to music on my Walkman. In those days I had already mastered the second mind. (*The Valkyries*, 27)

Through the experience, Gene establishes an “original relation to the universe” which in itself forms the basis of transcendentalism, according to Emerson. Later Chris passes

through similar phase and it is Gene who conducts her between the two selves. She achieves the 'second mind' in an easier manner and it is she who leads her husband towards his moment of revelation.

Erasing Memories

The fulfilment of the dream costs much to Paulo as he needs to erase his past and at the same time relive his experiences. The mysterious journey does not leave behind any traces of the past life. Paulo and Chris wilfully leave their hometown, their familiar circle and embrace the rather indifferent Gene as their guide and proprietor. The journey to the wild desert suggests their innate desire to move back to the original innocence, a prominent feature of transcendental characters. The innocent nature is not one of pastoral beauty, it is powerful enough to reshape their past egos and present apprehensions. Once reached there, the couple forsake everything they had, including the bottle of water which they kept as a final solace in the hot desert.

The process of leaving behind everything gains more relevance as it comes to the memories. They wilfully abandon their hitherto convictions and move towards their single goal, empty-handed and empty-minded. The conscious trainings to listen to the voice of the angel end up as a feeble attempt to surrender oneself to a petty infatuation with Valhalla, the Valkyrie, in the case of the protagonist. The path becomes blurred as the aim turns out to be crystal clear. Paulo cries out in agony and in his painful ravings he reminds of the tales related to Christian Saints. The sufferings they have undergone are educative to the protagonist. His agony exceeds all limits and his fruitless romance teaches him the futility of human passions.

The infatuation with the Valkyrie brings in the final note of his journey, he falls a prey to the illusions in the desert. The roles of Chris and Valhalla get exchanged and the two women merge into one. One part remains with Paulo, which he identifies as Chris while the

other continues the legendary journey. As suggested by Thoreau, Paulo yearns for a “life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust (*Walden* 15). The desire to see his angel makes him leave everything behind and he continues his journey after his final departure with the Valkyries. His tortured self attains its goal and the meeting with his angel takes him to deeper, more significant pursuits. His placing of an idol in the desert proves that his return to the city is imminent. Still he leaves a part of him, the idol, in the Mojave as a remainder of his fulfilled search.

Conclusion

The presence of transcendental elements in *The Valkyries* reveals that the novel is an exposition of Paulo Coelho’s stand in support of neo-transcendentalism. The search for the real mind and the second mind moves along with Thoreau’s ideal of the natural self. The Mojave Desert represents the human desire to leave out all the acquired selves behind. The journey sheds all the passions and emotions of the protagonist who returns to his innate being in order to attain his angel. The self-denying Paulo in the second half of the novel is a person without any convictions or conjectures. He wilfully surrenders his dreams and ideals to that of the Valkyries. This leads him to an intimate relation with their leader- Valhalla.

This revelation is enough for Paulo who now encounters his angel. The visit of the angel does not pronounce the end of his search as he keenly places the idol of Virgin Mary in the desert. The protagonist’s return to the ordinary life reminds the reader that the new vistas of revelations are still open to him and the saga will continue even if in a different manner by different persons.

Transcendentalism appears in a more advanced dimension in the works of Paulo Coelho. It is the wilful acceptance of the innate, inborn wilderness in the human beings. The sudden revelations replace the aim and the protagonist remains as a more than satisfied

adventurer in the end. Thus instead of offering a typical end to the journey, the narrator retraces his steps and starts another venture, with renewed energy and vigour.

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